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Karen Ferree and Jeremy Horowitz

Department of Political Science, The University of California, San Diego, California, USA

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Ties that bind? The rise and decline of ethno-regional partisanship in Malawi, 1994–2009

Karen Ferree* and Jeremy Horowitz

Department of Political Science, The University of California, San Diego, California, USA
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In the first three elections following Malawi’s return to democracy in 1993, voting patterns displayed a clear ethno-regional pattern. Then in 2009 the regional pattern broke down in dramatic fashion, with the incumbent President, Bingu wa Mutharika, attracting majority support across all three regions. This article first examines whether ethnic identities were at the root of Malawi’s ethno-regional electoral pattern. Our tests show that while ethnic identities were associated with partisan attachments in some areas, regional patterns were more consistently related to other factors, particularly views of the government’s performance and the inclusiveness of the ruling party. We then examine the breakdown of the regional pattern, drawing on trend analysis of public opinion data from 1999 to 2008. We show that by 2009 the majority of Malawians in all three regions had come to hold positive views of Mutharika’s performance and had come to see his government as inclusive. We conclude, therefore, that shifts in patterns of partisanship had more to do with political factors – Mutharika’s symbolic and substantive policies during this first term – than ethnic identities.

Malawi reminds us that incumbents, when faced with incentives to construct multi-ethnic support bases, can use the power of the state to reach out across ethnic political boundaries and re-order supposedly entrenched patterns of partisanship.

Keywords: ethnicity; elections; democracy; Malawi; Africa

Introduction

Election results in Malawi’s first three elections under democracy in 1994, 1999, and 2004 followed a predictable pattern: voters in the northern part of the country voted as a consistent bloc, first for the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD) and later for coalitions endorsed by prominent northern politicians; voters in the central region lined up behind the Malawi Congress Party (MCP); and voters in the southern region voted for the United Democratic Front (UDF) or other parties running on a ‘southern’ profile. Malawi’s first three elections
therefore resembled a ‘regional’ census: where a voter lived predicted how she voted.¹ This pattern ended in 2009, when the southern-based Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), an offshoot of the UDF, won widespread support in all three regions of the country to (re)take the presidency and secure a majority of seats in the legislature. In this article, we explore the factors that underlay Malawi’s regional census as well as those that contributed to its collapse in 2009. In so doing, we contribute not only to scholarship on political attitudes and behaviour in Malawi, but also to broader debates about the role of ethnicity in African elections.

The most prominent explanation for census-style elections is Donald Horowitz’s expressive voting hypothesis, which argues that ethnic voters use their vote to register their identities as members of groups.² Elections become ‘head counts’ in which ethnic demographics predetermine outcomes, creating permanent winners and losers and jeopardizing the long-term viability of the democratic process.³ In this article we look at a precursor to voting behaviour – patterns of partisanship – and evaluate the extent to which expressive motivations drove Malawi’s ‘regional census’. Were Malawians who held regional or ethnic identities more likely to be regional partisans than Malawians who identified differently?⁴ Were expressive motivations for partisanship more common in some regions of the country versus others? Did other factors like gender, education, and political knowledge or impressions of government performance and beliefs about the inclusiveness of government also shape patterns of partisanship? The answers to these questions are important in explaining the origins of the ‘regional census’ and why it broke down in 2009. They also help us evaluate the current and future health of democracy in Malawi.

To examine patterns of partisanship, this article draws on survey data collected by four rounds of the Afrobarometer.⁵ We look intensively at the survey from 1999, when regional partisanship was strongly entrenched; we also look at trends over time between 1999 and the most recent survey in 2008. To preview our results, we find mixed support for the identity voting hypothesis in the 1999 data. In one of Malawi’s three regions, the centre, we find that respondents who identified with one of the regional tribes, the Chewa, were somewhat more likely to be partisans of the regional party, the MCP. In Malawi’s other two regions, the north and the south, we find little evidence that expressive motivations drove partisanship. By contrast, in all regions of the country, views about the president (Bakili Muluzi, a member of the UDF in 1994 and 1999) and government exerted a powerful and systematic effect on behaviour. In the north and centre, Malawians who had positive evaluations of the president’s performance and/or felt cared for by him and his government were much less likely to be regional partisans. In the south (home of the ruling UDF at the time of the 1999 survey), the opposite was true. Moreover, we find that views of the president and government were regionally polarized in 1999: Malawians in the north were much less likely to hold positive opinions of their president and government. In contrast, most Malawians of the southern region felt positive about Muluzi, believed he would look out for them,
and felt his government was inclusive. Malawians from the centre were somewhere in between. Finally, we find in our trend analysis that regional polarization of views about performance and favouritism began eroding around 2005. By 2008, the year prior to the historical 2009 election, regional polarization in these important political evaluations had largely disappeared. Thus, views about performance and favouritism correlated with individual level variation in partisanship in 1999, regional differences in partisanship in 1999, and changes in these variables preceded the major electoral changes of 2009.

Our results suggest three conclusions: first, expressive motivations might drive patterns of partisanship some of the time, but they do not provide a sufficient explanation for the census outcome as a whole. Second, expressive motivations for electoral behaviour are variable, not constant: they emerge in some contexts and time periods but not others. And third, standard ‘politics as usual’ variables exhibit a more powerful and systematic relationship with patterns of partisanship in Malawi than ethnic or regional identity. If we want to explain Malawi’s census, we must explain why Malawians in the northern and central regions of the country were less impressed with the president’s performance and felt less cared for by him and his government than residents of the south; moreover, we need to understand how these evaluations changed prior to the 2009 election. We speculate that the source of these patterns lies in politics past and present. Flows of patronage under Hasting Banda’s long rule explain why identity voting emerged in the centre but not in other regions. Flows of patronage during the early democratic period (the time covered by the survey we used) explain why voters in the north and centre felt less enthusiastic about the southern-based UDF government. In addition, we anticipate that the success of the DPP in breaking down the regional census in 2009 reflected efforts by the leader of the DPP (and President of Malawi), Bingu wa Mutharika, to build bridges to voters outside of the south through symbolic gestures as well as universalistic programs (like a fertilizer subsidy). These efforts, not changes in patterns of ethnic identification, account for the success of his party in 2009.

Thus, while the strong and persistent correlation between region and partisanship during Malawi’s first 15 years of democracy would appear to support the notion that identity drives politics in Malawi, our analysis reveals that this correlation is misleading; more prosaic factors like performance evaluations and perceptions about favouritism account much more systematically for Malawians’ partisan choices.

**Malawi’s regional census**

After decades of single-party rule under President Hastings Banda, Malawi made the transition to multiparty politics in 1993. In the subsequent national election, held in 1994, a clear regional pattern emerged, with citizens by and large lining up behind ‘regional champions’ in each of Malawi’s three regions.6 While Malawi’s regions are ethnically mixed, some observers speculated that the
pattern of regional voting reflected the emergence of strong regional identities. Kalipeni, for example, argued that ‘Regionalism appears to have resulted in the formation of three super-ethnic groups each with its own regional base’. Subsequent elections in 1999 and 2004 witnessed considerable fluidity in the party system as electoral coalitions were made and remade between electoral rounds. Yet, despite the shifting elite alliances, the pattern of regional bloc voting remained until the 2009 election, when it dramatically broke down. In this section we review electoral patterns in each of Malawi’s three regions, offering evidence of persistent regional bloc voting in the 1994, 1999, and 2004 elections. We then discuss the historic 2009 election, when regional patterns of voting broke down.

In the north, several ethnic groups have consistently voted as a cohesive block since the re-introduction of multiparty elections, with more than 70% of northern voters supporting the same party in each of the three presidential elections since 1994. In 1994, the north voted en masse (88%) for Chakufwa Chihana, a Tumbuka from the northern region running on the AFORD ticket. In 1999 Chihana joined an electoral coalition with the central-based MCP, running as the vice presidential candidate on MCP’s ticket, and 89% of northern voters followed him in supporting the MCP’s presidential candidate. In 2004, the northern party (AFORD) split in two, with Chihana this time throwing his support behind the southern-based UDF. Chihana’s controversial decision undermined the party’s strength, as many AFORD members broke off to form splinter parties. The main party that emerged from the break-up of AFORD was the Movement for Democratic Change (Mgode), which in 2004 joined forces with a number of minor partiers in the Mgwirizano (Unity) coalition. In the 2004 election, 73% of northern voters supported the candidate endorsed by Mgode, Gwanda Chakuamba. Thus, despite shifting coalitions and alliances among northern leaders, voters in the north remained consistent in their cohesive support for the front-running northern party or coalition during the first 15 years of Malawi’s democracy.

Similarly, the central region displayed consistent regional bloc voting during Malawi’s first three elections. The MCP has long maintained strong roots in the central region, where Banda’s ethnic community, the Chewa, make up a majority of the population. During the transition to democracy, the central region, unlike other parts of the country, stood behind Banda, voting for the maintenance of his one-party system in the 1993 referendum. In the 1994 election Banda stood as the MCP’s presidential candidate, pulling in 64% of the region’s vote. In 1999 the MCP candidate, Gwanda Chakuamba, who had been Banda’s running mate in 1994, had a similar showing (62%). In 2004, the MCP’s candidate, John Tembo, again polled a consistent 64% of the central region. Thus, central voters have steadfastly backed the MCP, a party with solid ‘central’ credentials, though the party has run different candidates in each election.

The southern region, while ethnically diverse, was the near exclusive domain of the UDF in 1994 (when it won 78% of the regional presidential vote) and in 1999 (79%). The party drew its strongest support from the Muslim Yao regions (its
candidate in 1994 and 1999, Bakili Muluzi, was a Yao). Yet, the UDF also enjoyed strong support from non-Muslim/non-Yao areas in the 1994 and 1999 contests. In 2004, the UDF’s presidential candidate, Bingu wa Mutharika, won a mere 53% of the southern vote. The UDF’s decline can be attributed primarily to the entrance of two opposition candidates with strong ‘southern’ credentials. Brown Mpinganjira, from Mulanje district in the southeastern corner of Malawi, ran as the head of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and succeeded in capturing 15% of the vote in the southern region. His strongest support came from his home district (Mulanje) where he won 57% of the vote and neighbouring Phalombe district, where he gained 37%. The race also included Chakuamba, a southerner from Nsanje district in the far south of the country. Chakuamba, who ran as the candidate of his newly-formed Republican Party in 2004, succeeded in capturing 24% of the southern vote, drawing strong support from his home district Nsanje (73%) and neighbouring Chikwawa (58%), as well as from the northern region. Hence, the UDF’s decline in 2004 did not signal the breakdown of the basic voting pattern that had characterized the previous two elections: southern voters continued to support candidates with strong southern credentials. The difference in 2004 was that the field of candidates offered southerners multiple options, unlike previous elections in which there was only one main party with strong southern roots.14

In marked contrast to the first three elections, regional voting broke down in 2009. A bit of background is useful. In early 2005, President Mutharika (‘Bingu’) left the ruling party to form the Democratic Progressive Party, reportedly because significant UDF actors (including Muluzi, who continued to head the party) opposed his efforts to combat corruption.15 Although Bingu continued to hold the presidency, the DPP lacked a parliamentary presence and sought support from opposition parties (especially the Mgwirizano Coalition). Muluzi and the UDF – with frequent help from the MCP – fought Bingu’s initiatives and tried (unsuccessfully) to have him impeached.16 The 2009 presidential race pitted Bingu against six contenders, including John Tembo of the MCP (who was endorsed by the UDF after the Electoral Commission disqualified Muluzi as a presidential candidate). Six parties – including the DPP, the MCP, the UDF, and AFORD – competed in the parliamentary elections, along with a large number of independents. In spite of the presence of regional alternatives, the DPP performed well not just in its home region (the south), but throughout the entire country. In the presidential race, Bingu took 64% of the vote to the MCP’s 30%. In the parliamentary race, the DPP took 24 out of 33 seats in the north whereas independents took 8 and AFORD just 1; it took 37 out of 73 seats in the central region, with the MCP taking 27; and it took 51 to the UDF’s 18 seats in the south.

In sum, the first three elections in Malawi followed a ‘regional census’ pattern: the regional origins of a voter strongly predicted whom she supported. The regional census pattern broke down in 2009, however, when the DPP and its southern-based candidate managed to win support throughout all three regions of the country. In the next section, we review the predominant explanation for census style elections.
The expressive voting hypothesis

The widespread adoption of multiparty elections in many African countries over the last 20 years has led to a resurgence of scholarship on electoral behaviour in Africa’s new democracies. Much of this literature has sought to measure the extent to which ethnicity drives electoral outcomes. Case studies from a variety of countries have found consistent evidence of a link between ethnicity and party support, although these studies have also shown that even where ethnicity affects electoral decision-making, other factors, such as performance evaluations, economic conditions, and policy expectations also matter. Cross-national studies have shown that while ethnicity plays an important role in many countries, the extent to which ethnicity predicts party support varies across African cases. Of particular relevance to this paper is Ishiyama and Fox’s study of partisanship in twelve African countries. Using data collected by the Afrobarometer in 1999–2001, the authors found no evidence of a consistent link between ethnic identification and partisanship. In most countries, survey respondents who identified in ethnic terms were no more or less likely to think of themselves as close to any political party. Yet, in two cases (Zimbabwe and Nigeria), the authors did find evidence of a negative relationship, and in one case (Malawi) their analysis uncovered a positive association. In this article we seek to gain greater purchase on the relationship between ethnic identification and partisanship by conducting a series of tests at the sub-national level in Malawi in order to strengthen our understanding of the variable effects of ethnic identity on electoral behaviour.

While there is a general consensus in studies of electoral politics that ethnicity is an important cleavage in many African democracies, there is less agreement about why ethnicity matters to voters. As discussed by Mattes and Ferree, there are a number of possible explanations for ethnic voting. Voters may believe that co-ethnic candidates will deliver a larger share of state-controlled resources to one’s group than non-co-ethnics. Alternatively, voters within a particular group or region might all share common policy preferences or perceptions of incumbent performance, and these factors – rather than ethnic identity – might drive them all to vote in a similar pattern. Other explanations highlight the informational role of ethnicity and how this can lead to bloc voting even when voters do not hold strong ethnic identities. However, the predominant line of reasoning remains the expressive theory of ethnic voting.

The expressive approach sees voting as a means of expressing group allegiance. In comparative studies of ethnic politics, its most prominent advocate is Donald Horowitz, whose 1985 book Ethnic Groups in Conflict is still the benchmark for studies of ethnic voting. Building on the ideas of social psychologist Henri Tajfel, Horowitz locates the micro foundations of census elections in the identity attachments of voters. Because the very act of casting a vote for an ethnic party is an affirmation of identity, voters derive psychic benefits from supporting ethnic parties. Voting is not an act of choice, based on a rational weighing of alternatives, or a way to further self-interest, but an expression of group
allegiance. Furthermore, allegiance to party, constructed as it is from the raw material of identity, is non-negotiable. Patterns of partisanship are fixed and rigid. Elections become a projection of demographics, a mere ‘counting of heads’. Although Horowitz has developed this logic the most thoroughly, it underlies other visions of elections in divided countries offered by scholars like Lijphart, Snyder, and Dickson and Scheve. The expressive voting perspective also resonates with work by American scholars like Kinder and Sears, Terklidsen, Kinder and Sanders, and Mendelberg that emphasizes prejudice as the key factor behind white reluctance to support African-American candidates.

Can the expressive voting hypothesis, then, explain the regional voting pattern in Malawi? Are Malawians, when choosing a party to support, doing so with the intent of expressing a regional identity? And, is there variation across groups of voters in the extent to which they base their political behaviour on identity considerations? We turn next to empirical tests.

Data and tests

Our tests have a simple premise: if the expressive voting hypothesis is correct, individuals who identify in regional terms should be more likely to conform to the regional census pattern (support their regional party ‘champion’) than individuals who identify either with other regions or individuals who do not identify in regional terms at all. In conducting these tests, we used data collected in Malawi in November and December of 1999 by round one of the Afrobarometer, a multi-country survey that explores attitudes in new African democracies. We used 1999 because regionalized partisanship and voting were firmly entrenched during this year. The Afrobarometer employs nationally representative samples drawn through a multi-stage stratified, clustered sampling procedure. The sample size of the 1999 Malawi survey was 1,208.

To operationalize identity, we rely on the Afrobarometer’s measures of self-identification. In particular, we make use of a question (number 83) in the Afrobarometer that asks: ‘We have spoken to many Malawians and they have all described themselves in different ways. Some people describe themselves in terms of their language, religion, race, and others describe themselves in economic terms, such as working class, middle class, or a farmer. Besides being Malawian, which specific group do you feel you belong to first and foremost?’ Answers to this question covered a huge range, from the predictable ascriptive and economic responses, such as ‘Chewa’, ‘Muslim’, or ‘worker’, to more idiosyncratic answers like ‘gentleman’, ‘housewife’, and ‘development oriented person’.

Self-identification is not an ideal measure of identity for at least two reasons. First, survey respondents may not answer survey questions in a truthful manner. If lying occurs at random, it should not create serious problems. However, if respondents lie systematically – perhaps to conceal allegiance to normatively undesirable groups – this could introduce bias into our analysis. While this possibility is difficult to rule out conclusively, we know that Malawians had no trouble
providing ascriptive responses in general – over half of the respondents gave tribal answers to the identity question and another significant portion gave religious ones (see Table 2 below). Moreover, following the statistical tests presented below, we conduct a robustness check on the main findings by including variables on enumerator characteristics (language, age, gender, education, background) in order to control for the possibility that respondents may have felt more or less comfortable providing certain types of identity answers depending on who was conducting the interview.

Second, in contrast to identity, which is dynamic, multi-dimensional and responsive to context, survey responses are static and single-dimensional. A person who identifies as a ‘student’ in one context might be a ‘southerner’ in a different one and a ‘Muslim’ in yet another. The Afrobarometer gives respondents the opportunity to answer in only one way, forcing them to choose which of their identities to privilege at the moment. The identity they choose in the context of the survey might differ from the identity they would privilege in the voting booth. While nothing short of an experimental setting could remove this problem, we believe it is attenuated in this data for the following reason: the question on identity occurred close to three quarters of the way through the survey (question 83 out of 120). Prior to answering the identity question, respondents answered a battery of questions relating to national politics, including ones on policy and issue importance, the performance of the government, corruption, political institutions, and the meaning of democracy. Although these are not equivalent to probing for identity immediately before or after voting, they do arguably prime for national politics. For this reason, we believe that the problem of selecting the ‘wrong’ identity from the respondent’s identity repertoire is perhaps less serious than it seems at first glance.

Our dependent variables are based on two Afrobarometer questions from the 1999 survey that ask about partisanship: question 108 (‘Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular party?’) and question 109 (‘Which party is that?’). From these, we create three dummy variables: regional partisans (in the north, these are respondents who feel close to AFORD; in the central region, they are respondents close to the MCP; and in the south, they are respondents who are close to the UDF); non-regional partisans (for each region, these are partisans of non-regional parties, e.g. UDF supporters in the north); and independents (respondent who say they are not close to any party). Table 1 provides a breakdown of these variables by region.

Table 1. Partisan attachments by region, 1999 (percentages).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Partisans of regional party</th>
<th>Partisans of non-regional parties</th>
<th>Independents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Table does not include respondents who either refused or answered ‘other’.
While actual vote choice would be a more direct measure of regional voting, the first round Afrobarometer did not ask questions about vote choice. Partisanship is strongly linked with vote choice, however, and understanding what makes voters feel close to certain parties is a critical first step to explaining the way they vote. Moreover, partisanship generates an *easier* test for identity voting: Horowitz argues that identity creates a strong bond between parties and voters, a very resilient form of partisanship. If true, this suggests that partisans are more likely than independents to be identity voters. If the identity hypothesis holds, it is most likely to hold here. This gives us greater confidence in any negative results we find: if identity voting does not emerge in a study of partisanship, it is unlikely to emerge in a study of voting.

**Regional identities**

The most straightforward test of the identity voting hypothesis would look at the behaviour of regional identifiers (northerners who identify as ‘northern’, for example) and compare their behaviour with non-regional identifiers (northerners who select a different identity, perhaps ‘Tumbuka’ or ‘farmer’). We would expect regional identifiers to be stronger supporters of regional parties than non-regional identifiers. Furthermore, if Malawi’s regional census is to be explained by identity, we should expect a very high prevalence of regional identifiers in the population.

A quick look at Table 2 shows why the regional identity story cannot go very far in explaining Malawi’s regional census. Put simply, very few Malawians claim regional identities. Even in the north, with the most consistent and strongest pattern of regional voting, only 2% of respondents chose this option. In the central and southern regions, not one respondent identified in regional terms. Thus, regional identities do not appear to animate the thoughts of Malawians: whatever drives their regional voting patterns, it is not overt identification with ‘region’.

Instead, as Table 2 makes clear, most Malawians either identify tribally or in non-regional/non-tribal terms (farmer, working class, etc.). Furthermore (not shown in table), tribal and non-tribal identities are quite diverse: the largest group of identifiers in the north (the Tumbuka) makes up only about one third of the respondents; a similar situation holds in the central region with the Chewa, and the south is even more diverse, where the largest group of self-identifiers (the Lomwe) makes up only 15% of respondents. Hence, not only are regional

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Regional</th>
<th>Tribal</th>
<th>Non-tribal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
identities rare, the regions lack overarching identities of any sort that could explain relatively homogeneous patterns of regional partisanship. As this is a simplistic way of operationalizing ‘regional’ identity, in the next section, we look at the link between tribe and region.

**Tribal identities as regional identities**

If tribes are regionally concentrated such that the connection between tribe and region is strong, then Malawians might reasonably view supporting the regional champion as a way of expressing a tribal identity. For example, the Chewa is the predominant tribe in the central region; Chewas are found outside of this area, but only in small numbers. Hence, Chewas might see supporting the party of the central region, the MCP, as a way of expressing their allegiance with the Chewa tribe. A similar story might be told for other tribes with strong regional ties (e.g. the Tumbuka in the north or the Yao in the south). If this is true, it is not regional identities we should be looking at, but **tribal identities with strong regional roots**.

We might expect Malawians who identify with tribes with strong regional roots to be more likely to conform to the regional partisanship pattern than Malawians who either identify with non-regional tribes or Malawians who do not identify in tribal terms at all.

In order to test this, we used the third round of the Afrobarometer survey, conducted in 2005, which included an objective measure of ethnicity (Question 79 ‘What is your tribe?’), to map tribe to region.\(^3\)\(^5\)\(^6\) Breaking the responses to this question down by region, we coded the Tumbuka, Tonga, Lambya, and Ndali as northern tribes; the Chewa as a central tribe; and the Lomwe, Mang’anja, Nyanja, Sena, and Yao as southern tribes. The only tribe that was not overwhelmingly concentrated in one of Malawi’s three regions (i.e. they did not have a clear regional stronghold) was the Ngoni, who are distributed throughout the country.\(^3\)\(^6\)

Out of this mapping of tribe to region we created two variables: regional tribe identifiers and non-regional tribe identifiers. A respondent from the north who identified as a Tumbuka, Tonga, Lambya, or Ndali was coded as a regional tribe identifier. A respondent in the south or central region identifying as any of these groups, however, was coded as a non-regional tribe identifier. All survey respondents who gave tribal responses were coded in this fashion.\(^3\)\(^7\) We also created a third variable to capture all of the respondents who identified in non-tribal terms (as ‘farmers’ or ‘housewives’, etc.).

We explore the identity voting hypothesis by running multinomial logit models for each of Malawi’s three regions. Multinomial logit (MNL) is frequently used to estimate models of vote choice or partisanship in multiparty settings.\(^3\)\(^8\) When there are several party choices, MNL makes it possible to estimate the probability of choosing one party relative to the other options. The results from MNL models present coefficients for the comparison of each choice to a reference category. In our analysis, we treat regional partisans as the reference category. This means that the models for each region show how the independent variables affect the
likelihood of being a non-regional partisan or an independent voter, relative to a regional partisan.39

Our main independent variables are regional tribe identifiers, non-regional tribe identifiers, and non-tribal identifiers. In all specifications, non-tribal identifiers are the reference category, so all results should be interpreted relative to them. In each of the three regional models, we include a dummy variable for the Ngoni, who were coded in all regions as a regional tribe but may be different from other regional tribes because of their presence throughout the country. We also include dummy variables for prominent regional tribes, such as the Tumbuka in the north and the Yao in the south.40 If the identity hypothesis holds, we expect respondents who identify as members of regional tribes to be more likely than everyone else to support a regional party, and less likely than non-regional tribe identifiers to support a non-regional party. We also expect both kinds of tribal identifiers to be less likely than non-tribal identifiers to claim to be independent.

We controlled for several additional factors. Class and education could matter for a number of reasons. Early modernization theory held that development would free individuals from tribal attachments.41 Hence we might expect respondents with less education and greater ties to the traditional rural economy to be more likely to conform to the regional census. On the other hand, Bates speculated that modernization increased the attraction of ethnicity.42 Under this logic, perhaps it is the well-educated urban elite who generate the census. We might also expect class to matter for more proximate political reasons: in 1999 (the year the survey we use was in the field), the southern-based UDF had the support of the majority of the business sector of the country as well as heavy influence over the media.43 We might therefore expect better educated and informed voters to support it regardless of region. To test this, we include variables measuring education (Question 113),44 whether or not the respondent lives in a rural area (Question 122B), and informational sophistication (as measured by newspaper readership and radio listening).45 In addition, we tried a variety of occupational variables.46 These were never significant in any formulation so we dropped them in our final regressions. Finally, we included gender (Question 125), as several studies have found this to be a factor in explaining African voting behaviour.47

In addition to these socioeconomic and demographic factors, we included variables that measured the respondent’s feelings about the president and government in general. A prominent line of research identifies performance evaluations as critical in shaping voting behaviour,48 as do several prior studies of voting in Africa.49 We therefore include a performance measure from the 1999 survey in our models, coded 1 if the respondent approves or strongly approves of the president’s job performance in the past year, 0 otherwise (Question 66). As the president was a member of the southern-based UDF, we expect that positive views of his performance should reduce regional voting in the northern and central regions, but increase regional voting in the south.

We also included a dummy variable ‘president uninterested’ if the respondent thinks the president is not at all interested or not very interested in her well-being
(Question 64); and an additional dummy variable ‘government exclusive’ if the respondent thinks the government represents the interests of one group only rather than all Malawians (Question 88). While there are many possible interpretations for these variables, we believe they capture the extent to which the respondent feels the president and his government ‘care’ about her, where ‘care’ probably involves some sort of material connection. Respondents in the north or central areas who feel connected to the UDF-controlled government and presidency and perceive themselves to be beneficiaries of its largesse should be less likely to conform to the regional voting pattern than respondents who feel unconnected and excluded. The opposite should hold for the south.

Our results are contained in Tables 3–6. Table 3 shows the multinomial logit model for the north. Looking first at the identity variables, the picture is clear: there is no evidence that identity voting correlates with regional voting in this area of the country. The identity variables are insignificant for all three dependent

| Table 3. Multinomial logit model of partisanship in the Northern Region (1999). |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                                 | Independents    | Non-Regional Partisans |
| Regional tribe identifiers      | 0.78            | 0.72             |
|                                 | (0.36)          | (0.22)           |
| Non-regional tribe identifiers  | 0.04            | 0.85             |
|                                 | (0.98)          | (0.35)           |
| President’s performance         | 0.63            | 0.24             |
|                                 | (0.43)          | (0.73)           |
| President uninterested          | -1.36 +         | -1.25*           |
|                                 | (0.07)          | (0.04)           |
| Government exclusive            | -1.72**         | -0.14            |
|                                 | (0.01)          | (0.80)           |
| Tumbuka identifiers             | 0.09            | -0.77            |
|                                 | (0.90)          | (0.19)           |
| Ngoni identifiers               | 0.64            | -0.56            |
|                                 | (0.55)          | (0.58)           |
| Low education                   | -1.20+          | -0.64            |
|                                 | (0.06)          | (0.18)           |
| Rural                           | -0.37           | 0.46             |
|                                 | (0.67)          | (0.54)           |
| Female                          | 1.16+           | 0.51             |
|                                 | (0.05)          | (0.24)           |
| Newspaper reader                | 0.58            | 1.34             |
|                                 | (0.68)          | (0.16)           |
| Radio listener                  | -1.19+          | -0.26            |
|                                 | (0.06)          | (0.58)           |
| Constant                        | 1.06            | -0.10            |
|                                 | (0.43)          | (0.93)           |
| Observations                    | 133             |                  |
| Pseudo R-squared                | .14             |                  |

Notes: p values in parentheses. + significant at 10%; * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%.
variables. Northerners who identify as members of regional tribes are no more or less likely than northerners who identify as non-regional tribes, or northerners who do not identify tribally at all, to cross-over to a non-regional party or to proclaim independence from partisan ties. This is also true of Tumbuka and Ngoni.
identifiers. Hence, patterns of regional and tribal identification have no discernable relationship with patterns of support for regional parties in the north – a finding obviously at odds with the identity voting thesis.\textsuperscript{50}

So what does explain patterns of partisanship in the north? We find a degree of support for modernization theory: respondents with lower education are more likely to support the regional party (relative to being independent). We also find that those who listen to news on the radio on a daily basis (although not those who read newspapers) are more likely to be regional partisans. We speculate that this might reflect regional bias in local radio coverage. The results also show that women are more likely to be independent. A more consistent picture emerges from opinions regarding the inclusiveness of the government and beliefs about the president’s interest in respondents’ well-being, both of which matter in the north. Respondents who believe the government represents the interest of one group rather than all Malawians are more likely to be regional partisans than independents, and those who think the president is uninterested their

Table 6. Multinomial logit models of partisanship in the Southern Region (1999).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Independents</th>
<th>Non-Regional Partisans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regional tribe identifiers</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>−0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.43)</td>
<td>(0.89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-regional tribe identifiers</td>
<td>−0.55</td>
<td>−0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.58)</td>
<td>(0.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President’s performance</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>−1.97**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.70)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President uninterested</td>
<td>1.42**</td>
<td>1.51**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government exclusive</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>1.45**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yao identifiers</td>
<td>−0.49</td>
<td>−0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.37)</td>
<td>(0.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chewa identifiers</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.74)</td>
<td>(0.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low education</td>
<td>−0.16</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.59)</td>
<td>(0.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>−0.67*</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>−0.05</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.85)</td>
<td>(0.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper reader</td>
<td>1.17**</td>
<td>1.15+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio listener</td>
<td>−0.09</td>
<td>−0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.78)</td>
<td>(0.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>−1.63*</td>
<td>−1.67*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>525</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R-squared</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: p values in parentheses. + significant at 10%; *significant at 5%; **significant at 1%.
well-being are less likely to be independents or non-regional partisans. Quite possibly, these respondents feel excluded from the government’s largesse, and this—not the extent to which they identify with northern tribes—explains why they are regional partisans.\textsuperscript{51} This finding makes sense given the history of northern marginalization under Banda, particularly in the late 1980s, when restrictions were placed on the number of northerners who could enter university and northern teachers working in other parts of the country were forced to return to their home region.\textsuperscript{52} We suspect that the UDF government had not done much to reverse feelings of regional marginalization in the north at the time of the survey, and this explains the north’s strong record of regional partisanship.

Turning to the central region (Table 4), we find that several variables matter, including those relating to identity. Identifying as Chewa (captured here by the coefficient on regional tribe—see note 40 for an explanation) significantly reduced the probability of being an independent or feeling close to a non-regional party. In contrast, identifying as Ngoni had the opposite effect, decreasing the probability of being a regional partisan. These results support the identity voting hypothesis: those who identify with the regional tribe, the Chewas, are much more likely to conform to the regional partisanship patterns than those who do not identify this way. The only result that contradicts the identity hypothesis concerns non-regional identifiers: they appear less likely to be independents than regional partisans.

How might we explain the association between Chewa identification and MCP partisanship in the central region? We speculate that this association may have historical roots. Hastings Banda, a Chewa from the central region, ruled the country for many decades prior to the transition to multiparty democracy in the early 1990s. While in power, Banda and the MCP favoured Chewas and the central region, directing disproportionate patronage funds in their direction. Perhaps those individuals who most benefited from Banda’s largesse came both to identify in tribal terms (as Chewas) and to form strong bonds of partisanship with the MCP. If true, this would suggest that identification does not drive partisanship. Rather, both identification and partisanship are shaped by political factors like patronage.

We find no support for modernization variables in the central region, but views of the president and government clearly matter. Respondents who give the president positive overall ratings are more likely to be independents and non-regional partisans. Furthermore, respondents who believe the government is exclusive and the president does not care about them are less likely to be independents or non-regional partisans.

In order to unpack the substantive impact of these variables in the central region, we generated predicted values for supporting the regional party (the MCP) for eight different scenarios, ranging from the best case scenario for the governing UDF to the worst case scenario (or the strongest conditions for regional partisanship).\textsuperscript{53} These are contained in Table 5. The best case scenario for the UDF is in the top left corner of the table: here respondents have positive ratings of the
president and government’s performance and believe he is interested in their well-being and his government is inclusive. We calculated the probability of supporting the regional party under these conditions for Chewa and Ngoni identifiers. As expected, Ngoni identifiers are less likely than Chewa identifiers to support the regional party. However, even Chewa identifiers are not very likely to be regional partisans under these conditions.

The worst case scenario for the government is in the bottom right corner of the table, where respondents had negative views of the president and government’s performance and felt marginalized by him and the government. Chewa identifiers are more likely than Ngoni identifiers to support a regional party, as expected. However, in these conditions, nearly half of the Ngoni supporters would also support the regional party. Hence, while patterns of identification matter, they are far from overwhelming. It is also interesting to note that, as conditions deteriorate, identity matters more. The difference between Chewa and Ngoni identifiers when everything is going well (top left) is less than 20 percentage points. When things are going poorly (lower right), it is over 40 percentage points. Thus, when people feel pleased with the president’s performance and feel cared for by the government, the correlation between identity and partisanship is likely to become weaker.

Turning to the southern region (Table 6), we find little support for the identity voting hypothesis. Southerners who identify with one of the regional tribes are no more or less likely to feel close to the regional party (the UDF), or to support a non-regional party, or claim to be independent, than southerners who identify with a non-regional tribe or southerners who do not identify tribally at all. Patterns of identification appear to have no discernable relationship with partisanship.54

In contrast, the modernization variables do emerge as important. Living in a rural area decreases the chances that a respondent will be independent, whereas reading newspapers increases them. Hence, well-informed, literate, urbanites are the likely independents of the south. Newspaper readers are also more likely to support non-regional parties.55 Also important are perceptions about performance: positive views about the overall performance of the president (a member of the southern-based UDF) decrease the chances that a respondent will be a non-regional partisan, while increasing her chances of being a regional partisan. Finally, mirroring results in other areas of the country, respondents who believe the president is uninterested in their welfare are less likely to feel close to the regional UDF and more likely to feel close to a non-regional party or to proclaim independence. Similarly, respondents who believe the government is exclusive are more likely to be non-regional partisans than regional ones.56

We conducted several tests to examine the robustness of our findings. First, we investigated whether the strength of identification mattered. Using Afrobarometer question 84D (which asked respondents whether they felt closer to their identity group than they felt to other Malawians), we broke down all respondents into ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ identifiers. With this question, we created variables for strong and weak regional tribal identifiers, non-tribal identifiers, and non-regional
identifiers. We reran all models and found that these variables did not add significant explanatory power or undermine the key finding related to identity and partisanship.

Second, we included controls for the interview environment with questions that asked whether others were present during the interview, whether the respondent consulted others or was influenced by others, whether the interview aroused interest in the community, and whether the respondent appeared to be bored, dishonest, or uninterested. Some of the variables were occasionally significant, but not in any systematic way. More importantly, the inclusion of these controls – individually or as a group – never changed the significance of our main independent variables. We also added controls for enumerator characteristics to all models to test for the possibility that respondents might have been less willing to give accurate answers on sensitive political and social questions to enumerators with different background characteristics. We created five dummy variables that measured whether the respondent and the interviewer differed in terms of their home language, age, gender, education level, and urban/rural origins. We found that some of the variables were occasionally significant, but not in any consistent way across the models. The inclusion of these controls never affected the main findings on the identity or political variables presented above. Because some of the enumerator controls created multi-collinearity problems with the demographic variables in the models, we excluded them from the final specifications presented in Tables 3, 4, and 6.

Lastly, we entered the key independent variables relating to ethnic identification and political beliefs in a piecemeal fashion to be sure that the effects reported in the full models hold up when the variables are entered individually. The results for each region are available from the authors as an appendix. The core findings presented above remain, regardless of whether the variables are entered one at a time or collectively.

Given the importance of attitudes about the president and government in our individual level regressions (some combination of these variables mattered for all regions of the country, and at least one is significant in all of our specifications), we decided to look at the regional distribution of these variables (Table 7). We found that respondents in the north had negative opinions about the president’s performance and believed he did not care about them. They also tended to believe the government looked out for the interests of only one group of Malawians, not the whole country. In contrast, respondents in the south had positive views of the president’s performance and believed he cared about them. They also believed the government was inclusive. Hence, the north and the south diverged significantly in how they viewed the president and whether or not they felt included in his circle of beneficiaries. The central region was somewhere in between: a bit more positive than negative, but nowhere near as positive as the south. In sum, views of the president and government – which we now know are powerful predictors of regional partisanship at the individual level – are not randomly distributed in Malawi. Rather, they diverge significantly by region, mirroring overall patterns
of partisanship as well as vote choice. Malawi’s regional census therefore appears rooted in political variables, not purely social ones.

The 2009 Election

With these understandings of the origins of the regional census in hand, we return to the 2009 election, which broke all precedent when the winning presidential candidate (Bingu wa Mutharika) and his party (the DPP) won support throughout all three regions of the country, not just the south. What changed in Malawi to erode regional voting patterns?

While we cannot replicate our exact analysis for a later period (several of the variables we used, including the identity measure, were not collected in later rounds of the Afrobarometer, or were collected in different formats), we can examine changes in two variables that were collected consistently across successive rounds of the Afrobarometer: presidential performance evaluations and beliefs about government discrimination/favouritism. Table 8 shows performance ratings by region for four survey rounds (1999, 2003, 2005, and 2008).

As discussed earlier, the 1999 survey revealed strong regional disparities in presidential performance evaluations: northerners had very negative opinions of President Muluzi, whereas southerners thought very highly of Muluzi, and people in the centre of the country fell somewhere in between. The 2003 survey showed a similar pattern. The 2005 survey suggested large changes: over three quarters of northern respondents gave the president (by then Bingu wa Mutharika) a positive approval rating, whereas many southerners had soured on the leader they had elected. And

Table 7. Attitudes about president and government by region, 1999 (percentages).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Approves of president’s performance</th>
<th>Believes president is interested in respondent’s well-being</th>
<th>Believes government is inclusive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northern Region</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Region</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Region</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Positive = approve or strongly approve.

Table 8. Positive performance evaluations of the president by Region, 1999–2008 (percentages).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Positive = approve or strongly approve.
the 2008 survey, in the field less than a year before the 2009 election, revealed that at least 80% of respondents in all three regions approved of Bingu’s performance. Thus, while the presidency remained in the hands of southern-based parties for all four survey rounds, the sharp disparities in performance ratings evident in the early period had disappeared by 2008.

Further evidence of Bingu’s success in reaching outside of the south comes in Table 9, which shows views about discrimination/favouritism by region for the last three rounds of the Afrobarometer. As the table makes clear, in 2003 northern and central region residents were much more likely than southern residents to feel that the government treated them unfairly. In contrast, by 2008, only a small minority of residents in all three regions felt unfairly treated.

Table 9. Respondents who feel their group is mistreated by the government, 2003–2008 (percentages).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Afrobarometer Rounds 2-4 (2003, 2005, 2008).*
data show that in both the 2005 and 2008 surveys Bingu enjoyed positive evaluations across all three regions.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Bingu acted against the strongly stated recommendations of the international donor community and implemented a universal, government-funded program to subsidize fertiliser and seeds for Malawi’s farmers. Years of over-production and insufficient use of fertiliser (most Malawian farmers are too poor to purchase it unaided) had severely depleted Malawi’s soil. In 2005, when the rains failed, Malawi had a dismal maize harvest of 1.2 million metric tonnes. Nearly 5 million Malawians (more than a third of the country) needed emergency food aid. Bingu’s government began distributing coupons for significantly reduced price fertilizer and seeds in late 2005. With good rains and extensive use of fertilisers, the maize crop in 2006 rebounded to 2.7 million metric tonnes. In 2007, it hit 3.4 million metric tonnes and Malawi found itself in the fortunate position of being able to export grain to nearby countries. While international donors debated the long-term sustainability and economic implications of the subsidy program and the UDF and MCP criticized various aspects of its delivery, Malawian farmers exalted the program. Consumers also benefited as the price of grain fell with improved supply.63 While the Afrobarometer surveys did not ask specifically about the government’s agricultural policies, data on perceptions of the government’s overall economic management provides a useful indicator of support for Bingu’s policies. Table 11 shows

Table 10. Positive evaluations of the government’s efforts to combat corruption, 2003–2008 (percentages).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Positive = fairly well or very well.

Table 11. Positive evaluations of the government’s management of the economy, 1999–2008 (percentages).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Positive = fairly well or very well.
evaluations of the government’s performance in managing the economy from rounds 1–4. The data shows that over the course of his first term Bingu gained popular support for economic management, particularly in relation to his predecessor Muluzi. In 2005, a year after coming to office, ratings of Bingu’s economic performance were already substantially higher than those of Muluzi, and by 2008, a large majority of Malawians (70%) gave Bingu positive ratings for his handling of the economy, with a majority of respondents offering positive assessments in all three of Malawi’s regions.

We suspect that these actions by Bingu, which benefited people throughout Malawi, allowed him to curry positive performance evaluations outside of his home area in the south and to convince Malawians in the north and centre that his government was not regionally biased. Moreover, by reversing the regional disparities in performance and favouritism evaluations that had marked earlier periods in Malawi’s history, Bingu was able to win votes outside of the south and undo the ‘regional census’ that had previously characterized Malawi’s elections.

Mutharika likely also benefited from the problems afflicting his primary opponent, former President Muluzi. Until May of 2008, Muluzi was in exile in the UK, facing charges of corruption and embezzling. When he arrived at the airport in Lilongwe to begin his campaign, armed guards arrested him. With Muluzi’s candidacy disqualified, the UDF threw its support behind John Tembo of the MCP in a last-minute attempt to prevent Mutharika from regaining office.

Whether driven by the President’s policies or by the deficiencies of his opponent, Malawians allowed their political preferences to be swayed by factors external to their identity in the 2009 election.

This validates our earlier suggestion that expressive motivations and identity voting were not the primary drivers of Malawi’s regional census. We doubt that patterns of identification changed very much in Malawi between 2004 and 2009. What did change, however, were the president’s incentives to build broad-based constituencies. Bingu’s political survival depended on gaining support outside of the south. He consequently engaged in symbolic and substantive politics to court the north and centre of the country. Voters, not tied to their parties by the glue of identity, responded to the political climate of the time and rewarded the president for his efforts.

Conclusion

We set out in this paper to evaluate the extent to which expressive motivations explained the rise and decline of ethno-regional partisanship in Malawi during the 1994 to 2009 period. Using data from 1999 – when partisanship was strongly differentiated by region – we examined whether patterns of ethnic identification among voters in Malawi’s three regions could plausibly account for the observed pattern of ethno-regional partisanship that had been in force since the reintroduction of multiparty competition in 1994. We found that expressive motivations only partially correlated with patterns of partisanship; evidence of a link between ethnic
identification and party support existed in one region, the centre, but not in the north or the south. In contrast, views of the president and government, which were polarized by region, bore a much more systematic relationship with patterns of partisanship. Where respondents gave President Muluzi, who was in power at the time of the 1999 survey, and his party (the UDF), positive performance evaluations, believed that he cared about them, and thought his government looked after the interests of all Malawians, they were far more likely to support the UDF. Moreover, changes in these views preceded the decline of ethno-regional partisanship evident in the 2009 election. While Muluzi’s successor, Mutharika, came to power in 2004 with support mainly from southern voters, over the course of his first term, Mutharika succeeded in restructuring the pattern of ethno-regional partisanship that many observers had taken to be a basic fact of Malawian politics. He did so by convincing a majority of voters in all three regions that his government was concerned about their well-being and committed to implementing policies that would benefit all Malawians. We conclude, therefore, that the ‘regional census’ that was seen in the 1994, 1999, and 2004 elections occurred because Malawians from the north and central regions had much more negative views of the president and government than Malawians from the south. The ethno-regional census collapsed when Mutharika, fighting for political survival amidst deep divisions within the UDF, used the extensive resources available to an incumbent president (the powers of the state) to court voters outside of his home constituency in the southern region.

We draw several lessons from this case. First, while it is tempting to read an identity story into elections that exhibit a strong correlation between ethnicity and voting behaviour, correlation and causation are not the same. Identity motivations may play only a small role, or no role at all, in explaining why ethnic groups vote as blocs. In the Malawian case we found only weak evidence that patterns of ethno-regional partisanship were a reflection of deeply-held ethnic attachments. Second, although census style elections often appear to be set in stone, they can change quickly given the right circumstances. Within much of the ethnic politics literature there is a strong presumption that multi-ethnic societies produce rigid party systems in which little change occurs over time. In Malawi, however, region and partisanship correlated strongly – until they didn’t. The rapid collapse of ethnoregional partisanship in Malawi cautions against reading too much permanence into apparently entrenched patterns of ethnic voting elsewhere in Africa. Third, if we want to understand when and where ‘census’ elections occur and break down, we must first understand the incentives of politicians to cultivate multi-ethnic constituencies and the tools at their disposal to do so. Much of the literature on ethnicity in Africa assumes that incumbents will use the power of the state to reward their core constituency, reinforcing patterns of ethnic partisanship and polarization. Malawi reminds us that incumbents, when faced with incentives to construct multi-ethnic support bases, can also use the power of the state to reach out across political boundaries and re-order supposedly entrenched patterns of ethnic partisanship. And finally, while we have endeavoured to show
that patterns of regional partisanship in Malawi are sensitive to political dynamics, we would not conclude from our analysis that regionalism will never return to Malawi. Rather, the degree to which Malawi’s politics are marked by regionalism in the future will depend on the incentives facing presidents and other powerful politicians to curry support outside of their home constituencies and the resources at their disposal to do so. Should political actors face declining incentives to reach out across regional lines and instead revert to concentrating their efforts on regionally defined constituencies, we would expect to see a re-emergence of regionally based partisanship in Malawi.

Notes

3. By Horowitz’s account, ethnic political alignments undermine the democratic process because electoral losers face the prospect of being permanently excluded from power and its rewards. Such groups have few incentives to continue playing the democratic game and instead find it preferable to employ violence as a means to gain power. Ibid., 84.
4. In much of the existing literature on ethnic politics the term ‘ethnicity’ is used to encompass a variety of ascriptive (i.e. given by birth) categories, such as race, tribe, language group, religion, clan, and so forth. In this article, we are primarily interested in tribal identities (e.g. Tumbuka, Yao, Chewa, etc.), and regional identities (e.g. Northerner, Central person, Southerner) that may overlap with tribal categories.
7. Kalipeni, ‘Regional Polarization’.
10. All election data cited in this article is from the Malawi Sustainable Development Network Program, www.sndp.org.mw, accessed on 10 August 2007.
13. Kalipeni, ‘Regional Polarization’.
20. Ishiyama and Fox, ‘What Affects the Strength of Partisan Identity in Sub-Saharan Africa?’
21. Ibid., 762.
22. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 298.
29. Ibid., 294–5.
30. Lijphart, Patterns of Democracy; Snyder, From Voting to Violence; Dickson and Scheve, ‘Social Identity, Political Speech, and Electoral Competition’.
32. We use round 1 of the survey because it asked questions about self-identification, which, unfortunately, later rounds of the survey left out.
33. More information on the Afrobarometer is available at www.afrobarometer.org. See also Coslow, ‘Attitudes on Democracy and Markets in Malawi’, for the 1999 Round One Malawi Codebook. The codebook and data can be found at: http://afrobarometer.org/round1c.html.
35. The Afrobarometer employed the same sampling methods for each survey conducted in Malawi, allowing for comparisons across rounds.
36. It should be noted that Malawi’s tribes are not fully concentrated in particular regions. Data from the 2005 Afrobarometer survey show, for example, that about 20% of Tumbukas live outside of the northern region, 15% of Chewas live outside the central region, and 13% of Yaos reside outside of the southern region. Our mapping between tribe and region, therefore, is not perfect. Our goal, however, is simply to
map the association between region and tribe for those groups that are heavily concentrated in one of Malawi’s three regions. For this, we do not require a uniform match between tribe and region.

37. We dropped a small number of respondents who gave tribal identities we could not place.


39. The key assumption made by the MNL model is that the relative odds of selecting between two alternative parties or candidates is independent of the number of alternatives; this is known as independence of irrelevant alternatives (IIA). Where the pool of parties competing in elections is stable, as was the case in Malawi during the 1990s, concerns about violating the IIA assumption are minimized. See Dow and Endersby, ‘Multinomial Probit and Multinomial Logit’.

40. We include additional controls for prominent regional tribes as an extra precaution, to explore whether or not there is something special about identifying with specific regional tribes above and beyond any general relationship between identifying with a regional tribe and being a regional partisan. Thus, in our model for the north, we control for being a regional tribe identifier (which is anyone who identifies with one of the regional tribes (the Tumbuka, Tonga, Lambya, and Ndali)) and then we also control for identifying as Tumbuka, just to make sure there is nothing special about being a Tumbuka identifier above and beyond being a northern tribe identifier. Our choice of what constitutes ‘prominent’ regional tribes was based on the size of the group and the significance given to it in discussions of politics in the region but was inevitably somewhat arbitrary. As a robustness check, we also re-ran our models using additional extra tribal controls. Our basic substantive findings hold regardless of which tribes we include in the model. More details follow in the results section. We should also note that, in the model for the central region, it is not necessary to include a control for the prominent regional group (the Chewa) because the model already includes a control for Ngoni (all models control for the Ngoni). In the center, only two tribes (the Chewa and the Ngoni) are coded as regional tribes; therefore, because we control for Ngoni identifiers, the variable ‘regional tribe identifiers’ is equivalent to Chewa identifiers.

41. Lipset, Political Man; Lerner, The Passing of Traditional Society.


44. Following Miguel and Posner, ‘Sources of Ethnic Identification’, we recoded question 113 (highest level of schooling achieved) into multiple categories: no education, some primary education, primary completed, some secondary, secondary completed, and some post-secondary. The only distinction that mattered was between low and high education respondents, so we simplified our final specifications to include a dummy variable for low education, which includes those with no formal schooling and those who started but did not complete primary school.

45. For newspaper reading: Question 42C. We recoded this to dummy variable ‘newspaper reader’ if respondent read the newspaper once a day. For radio listening: Question 42A. We recoded this to a dummy variable ‘radio listener’ if the respondent got news from the radio every day.

46. Question 118. Following Miguel and Posner, ‘Sources of Ethnic Identification’, we recoded this into white collar, blue collar, student, business, farmers and fisherman, and a general ‘other’ category.


50. We also ran our models with additional tribal controls for the Lambya and Ndali. These variables were never significant and did not affect any of our other variables.

51. We worried that the 1999 electoral alliance of AFORD with the MCP might affect our results (though our use of partisanship rather than vote choice should mitigate this), so we re-ran the regression using AFORD and MCP as the regional parties. The results are very similar to the findings reported here.


53. King, Tomz, and Wittenberg, ‘Making the Most of Statistical Analysis’.

54. We also ran our models with additional tribal controls for the Lomwe, Mang’anja, Nyanja, and Sena. We found significant, but inconsistent, results for the Lomwe and the Sena. Lomwe identifiers were more likely to be regional partisans than independents (consistent with identity voting) but Sena identifiers were less likely to be regional partisans than independents or non-regional partisans (inconsistent with identity voting). We take this as further evidence that identity motivations matters some of the time for some voters, but cannot provide a coherent or consistent explanation for regional partisanship as a whole.

55. These results conform with Ishiyama and Fox (‘What Affects the Strength of Partisan Identity in Sub-Saharan Africa?’) who found that rural Africans were more likely than urban Africans to be partisans. Ishiyama and Fox explain this relationship by suggesting that partisanship is a conduit for patronage, which rural Africans desire or depend on more than do urban Africans. If so, it makes sense that we only find a link between living in a rural area and being a regional partisan in the south, because the ruling party (the UDF) was a southern party.

56. To test for multicollinearity, we calculated variance inflation factors (VIF) for all independent variables in each of the three models of regional partisanship (see Fox, *Regression Diagnostics*, for details on this diagnostic test). We follow Ishiyama and Fox, (‘What Affects the Strength of Partisan Identity in Sub-Saharan Africa?’) in treating any score greater than 4 as an indication of a multicollinearity problem. In the models of partisanship in the North and Central regions, none of the VIF scores exceeded 2. In the model for the South, the VIF scores on two variables exceeded the acceptable threshold (Chewa identifiers = 4.72; and non-regional tribe identifiers = 4.15), resulting in large part from the high correlation between these two variables (0.86). To examine whether the simultaneous inclusion of both in the model for the south may have affected the significance of either, we re-ran the model twice, each time excluding one of the two variables. We found that the exclusion of each variable did not cause the other to become statistically significant, ruling out the possibility that multicollinearity between the two affected their significance in the full model.

57. Unfortunately, the open-ended identity question that we used to create several of our key independent variables was dropped after Round 2 (2003) of the Afrobarometer. Moreover, responses to this question in 2003 were aggregated into broad categories, making it impossible for us to replicate our analysis using the 2003 data. The ‘president uninterested’ and ‘government exclusive’ variables were also dropped after Round 1.

58. Please see Afrobarometer (2002), Afrobarometer (2005), Afrobarometer (2007), and Afrobarometer (2008). For more information on the 1999 survey, see Coslow,
The question was worded: ‘To what extent are ________ people [people from the respondent’s group] treated unfairly by the government?’ The response categories were never, sometimes, often, or always. The table shows the percentage of respondents who answered often or always by region. There was a slight change in the format of the question between 2003 and 2005 (2005 and 2008 were the same): in 2003, the group in question was solicited from the respondent in an open-ended identity question and therefore could have been non-ethnic in nature; in 2005 and 2008, respondents were specifically queried about their ethnic group membership, so the response to the government discrimination question was necessarily ethnic in nature. We believe these differences are minor enough to make the data comparable. We should also note that a similar question was asked in 1999, but the response categories were different, making the 1999 data difficult to compare with other rounds. In keeping with the later data, however, the 1999 data (not in Table 9) show large regional discrepancies, with the north felt significantly more discrimination than either of the other regions, especially the south.

59. IRIN, ‘Malawi: Mutharika pays Banda a US$620,000 tribute’.
60. IRIN, ‘Malawi: Mutharika resigns from party, shuffles cabinet’.
61. This data comes from a question that asked, ‘How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven’t you heard enough to say: Fighting corruption in government?’
63. This data comes from a question that asked, ‘How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven’t you heard enough to say: Managing the economy?’
65. Ibid., 348.

Note on Contributors
Karen Ferree is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD).

Jeremy Horowitz is a PhD candidate in Political Science at UCSD.

Bibliography


